

The Leopard Sword

By the same author in the *Empire* series

Wounds of Honour
Arrows of Fury
Fortress of Spears

The Leopard Sword

Empire: Volume Four

ANTHONY RICHES



First published in Great Britain in 2012 by Hodder & Stoughton
An Hachette UK company

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A CIP catalogue record for this title
is available from the British Library

Hardback ISBN 978 1 444 71182 0
Trade Paperback ISBN 978 1 444 71183 7
E-book ISBN 978 1 444 71185 1

Typeset in Plantin Light by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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Hodder & Stoughton Ltd
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

www.hodder.co.uk

For Robin

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The writing of *The Leopard Sword* was at one point proving to be something of a challenge, with the book half-written but stubbornly refusing to progress beyond a knot in the plot from which I couldn't tear myself free. At the low point of this increasingly panicked situation an old friend, on hearing of my plight on a rugby pitch touchline one Thursday night, uttered the words that were to reinvigorate my writing life: 'Just come down to my office and write.' So I did. No internet (critical that, nothing with which to fluff about in endless prevarication), just cups of tea and the occasional chat, that and a blazing eight or nine hundred words an hour. It was like going from dial-up to super-broadband in one step. Lesson learned, I now rent a converted henhouse on a local farm – no internet there either – and when I'm not doing 'real' work I commute a few miles to write in blissful peace and without any opportunity to do anything but write. So to you, Eddie Hickey, go the biggest thanks of all this time round. Let's hope my new-found regime will see me turning out two books a year with perfect equanimity.

Apart from that I have to offer all the usual but heartfelt thanks. To Helen for encouragement and occasional strong direction (and tolerating the last touches being put to the script in the south of France); to the kids for putting up with it all; and when the pressure notched up a bit the dogs for providing the alternative perspective of lives bounded by the need to get walked and fed. My agent Robin was his usual urbane self, and Carolyn the editor sat on her hands pretending to be calm while I struggled over the line.

On the subject of Hodder & Stoughton it's worth mentioning

that my publisher remains a delight to work with, so thanks to Francine, Nick, Laure, Jaime, James, Ben and everyone else whose name I'm too scatterbrained to have remembered. Clare Parkinson did an amazing job on the copyedit and rescued me from several embarrassing errors, taking all that gore and unpleasantness in her stride. Well done. John Prigent also read the original manuscript, and made more than one telling comment, as ever!

Lastly, and as ever, thanks to everyone else that's helped me this time round but not been mentioned. To use that old cliché it's not you, it's me. Those people that work alongside me will tell you how poor my memory can be, so if I've forgotten you then here's a blanket apology. Where the history is right it's because I've had some great help, and where it's not it's all my own work.

Thank you.

Prologue

Germania Inferior, September, AD 182

‘Fucking rain! Rain yesterday, rain today and rain tomorrow most likely. This bloody damp gets everywhere. My armour will be rusting again by morning.’

‘You’ll just have to get your brush out again, or that crested bastard will be up your arse like a rat up a rain pipe.’

The two sentries shared a grimace of mutual disgust at the thought of the incessant work required to keep their mail free of the pitting that would bring the disapproval of their centurion down on them. The night’s cold mist was swirling around the small fort’s watch-tower, individual droplets dancing on the breeze that was moaning softly across the countryside around their outpost. The blazing torch that lit their section of the fortlet’s wall was wreathed in a ball of misty radiance that enveloped them with an eerie glow, and made it almost impossible to see further than a few paces. Shielding their eyes from the light as best they could, they watched their assigned arcs of open ground, with occasional glances into the fort below them to make sure that nobody, neither bandit nor centurion, was attempting to creep up on them.

‘I don’t mind the polishing so much as having to listen to that miserable old bastard’s constant stream of bullshit about how much harder it was in “the old days”: “When the Chauci came at us from the sea, well, that was real fighting, my lads, not that you children would recognise a fight unless you had a length of cold, sharp iron buried in your . . .”’

He fell silent, something in the darkness beneath the walls catching his attention.

‘What is it?’

He stared down into the gloom for a long moment, blinking his tired eyes before looking away and then back at the place where he could have sworn the darkness had taken momentary form.

‘Nothing. I thought I saw something move, but it was probably just a trick of the mist.’ Shaking his head, he planted his spear’s butt spike on the watchtower’s wooden planks and yawned widely. ‘I hate this time of year; the fog has a man jumping at shadows all the fucking time.’

His mate nodded, leaning out over the wall and staring down into the mist.

‘I know, sometimes you can imagine—’

His voice choked off, and after a moment’s apparent indecision he slumped forward over the parapet and vanished from view. While the other sentry goggled in amazement a hand gripped the edge of the wooden wall, hauling a black-clad figure over its lip and onto the torchlit platform; the intruder’s other hand was gripping a short spear whose blade was running with the dead sentry’s blood. The attacker’s boots shone in the light, the flickering illumination glinting off the heavy metal spikes that had carried him up the wall’s sheer wooden face. The sentry stepped forward, dimly aware of shouting from another corner of the fortlet, and raised his spear to stab at the attacker even as the other man flicked his hand as if in dismissal, sending a slender shank of cold iron to bury itself in his throat. Coughing blood, he staggered backwards and stepped out into thin air, plummeting to the hard earth ten feet below.

Lying half asleep in his small and draughty barrack, the detachment’s centurion heard the unmistakable sounds of fighting as he dozed on his bed, and he was on his feet with his sword drawn from the scabbard hanging from the room’s single wooden chair before he was fully awake. Thanking the providence that had seen him lie down without removing his boots, he pulled on his helmet and stepped out through the door with a bellowed command for his men to stand to, feeling woefully under-equipped without the

reassuring weight of his armour. A shadowy figure came at him out of the darkness to his right, the attacker's spear shining in the light of the torch fixed to the wall behind the centurion, and with a speed born of two decades of practice he swayed to allow the weapon's thrust to hiss past him before stepping in quickly to ram the gladius deep into his anonymous assailant's chest. Shrugging the dying man off the blade to lie gurgling out what was left of his life on the damp grass, he advanced towards the fortlet's gate, pausing to pick up a shield left lying alongside the broken body of one of the wall sentries. A throwing knife protruded from a bloody hole in the dead man's throat, and the centurion scowled at the ease with which his men's defences seemed to have been compromised.

As the centurion advanced cautiously down the wall's length, in hopes of making out the detail of what was happening around the fort's entrance, his heart sank. The gate was already open, and a flood of attackers was pouring through it with their swords drawn. Sheltering in the palisade's deeper shadow he watched as they overran the few men who still stood in defence of the fort, battering them brutally aside in a brief one-sided combat. Having already made the decision to slip away and report the disaster to his tribune in Tungrorum, the centurion shook his head, turning away from the sight of his command's destruction just in time to spot a dark-clad figure coming at him out of the darkness with a short spear held ready to strike. Smashing the weapon aside with the shield, he punched hard at the reeling assailant's face with his sword hand, catapulting the other man back against the wall. The intruder's head hit the unyielding wood with a dull thud and he slumped slackly to the ground, his eyes glassy from the blow's force. Kneeling to dimple the fallen attacker's throat with the point of his gladius, the centurion hissed a question into the stunned face, the one question that had been on the lips of every soldier in the province for months.

'Obduro? Who is Obduro?'

The dazed man simply looked up in mute refusal to reply.

'Tell me his fucking name or I'll stop your wind!' Desperation

lent the words a lethal menace that left the victim in little doubt as to the sincerity of this threat.

Regaining his senses, the fallen intruder cautiously shook his head, his eyes fixed on a point behind the vengeful centurion. He spoke quietly, his voice almost lost in the din of the one-sided fight: 'More than my life's worth.'

'Fair enough.'

Nodding slowly, his face hardening with the realisation that they were not alone, the centurion stood, and as he turned to face the men behind him he casually pushed the sword's point through the helpless man's throat, putting a booted foot on his victim's heaving chest to hold the man's body down while he withdrew the blade with a vicious twist. Half a dozen of the fort's attackers were standing in a loose half circle around him, all but one with spears levelled at him. Their black clothing, clearly intended to provide them with concealment in the moonless night, gave no clue as to who they might be, although more than one face seemed distantly familiar. The sixth man was armed only with a sword at his waist, but the centurion took an involuntary step back at the sight of the Roman cavalry helmet that completely hid his features. Its thick iron faceplate was tinned and highly polished, the mirror-like surface broken only by a pair of black eye holes and a slit between the thin, cruel iron lips. It reflected a distorted version of the centurion as he raised his shield to fight.

'You wanted Obduro? Then here I am. And that was an unnecessary death, Centurion, given the fact that your men are already scattered and beaten; and he was a good man, one of my best. You *know* I can make you pay heavily in lingering torment for that brief moment of revenge, and yet you still chose to pay that price for a fleeting moment of satisfaction. How amusing . . .' The words were muffled to the point of being made barely audible by the helmet's faceplate, and the voice was distorted enough to be unrecognisable, despite the rumours as to the wearer's identity that were the stuff of soldiers' gossip across the entire province. 'Tonight we are taking prisoners, Centurion, recruiting men to

join us in the deep forest. You could still live, if you'll drop the sword and shield and bend your knee to me and promise faithful service. Or you could die here, alone and uncelebrated, no matter how brave your death might be.'

The centurion shook his head, hefting the sword ready to fight.

'Send your men at me, then, and let's see how many I can put down before they stop me.' He spat on the cooling corpse at his feet in an attempt to goad the masked man to a rash move. 'I'll cost you more than your boyfriend here before you kill me.'

The masked man shook his head in return, then drew a long sword from the scabbard at his waist in response. The blade's surface seemed to ripple in the torchlight, its intricate pattern of dark and light bands giving it an unearthly quality.

'I do believe you're right, Centurion, and I'll not waste good men when there's no need. I'll take you down myself.'

He bent to pick up a discarded shield before stepping forward to face the centurion, lifting the patterned sword to show his opponent the weapon's point. They faced each other for a moment in silence before the soldier shrugged and took the offensive, stamping forward and hammering his sword into the masked man's shield. Once, twice, the gladius rose and fell, and for a brief moment the centurion believed that he was gaining the upper hand as the other man stepped back from each blow, using his shield to absorb its force. Raising his sword again he stepped in closer, swinging the blade with all his strength. Halting his retreat, the masked man met the descending gladius with his own weapon. The two blades met with a rending screech, and in a brief shower of sparks the patterned sword sliced cleanly through the iron gladius's blade and dropped two-thirds of its length to the ground in a flickering tumble. The centurion stared wide-eyed at the emasculated stump of blade attached to his ruined weapon's hilt. Allowing no time for the shocked soldier to get his wits back, the masked man attacked with a pitiless ferocity. He hacked horizontally at his enemy with the seemingly irresistible sword, carving cleanly through the centurion's shield. The layered wood and linen

fell apart like a rotten barrel lid, leaving the soldier clutching the lopsided section of board in one hand and his sword's useless remnant in the other. He threw the sword's hilt at his opponent, clenching his fists in frustration as it bounced off the polished faceplate with a metallic clang, then hurled what was left of the shield after it, only to watch as the other man sliced the flying remains cleanly in two with a diagonal cut. Taking another step forward, the masked man dropped his shield and raised the patterned blade in a two-handed grip.

‘And now, Centurion, you can pay that price I mentioned.’

Looking at his reflection in the helmet's polished facemask the centurion saw defeat in his own face and, enraged by the very possibility, he gathered himself to jump at his enemy with a snarl of hatred. Attacking with a speed and purpose that matched the soldier's berserk leap, the masked swordsman swung his sword in a short arc to slice into the centurion's abdomen, pulling the blow rather than cutting him cleanly in two, and grinding the weapon's ferocious edge across the centurion's spine as he ripped it free. The eviscerated soldier dropped to the ground in a gout of blood and intestines, his eyes flickering as his brain absorbed the sheer scale of the destruction wrought on his body. Bending as if to speak to the dying officer, the swordsman cleaned his blade on a fold in the other man's tunic, then slipped the sword into its scabbard. He lifted the helmet's faceplate to allow the cold night air to cool his sweating face. Looking down at the dying soldier he smiled bleakly, nodding his respect.

‘Well done, friend. You died like a man. And now you are on your way to meet your gods, once we give you the coin with which to pay for your crossing. In reality, of course, given where you are, you will only be meeting Arduenna. And trust me, Centurion, she is a spiteful, vindictive bitch.’

He turned away, only to find his leg held in a firm grip. The dying centurion was using the last of his strength to clamp a trembling hand around his ankle.

‘*You . . .?*’

He stared down into the fading light of the dying man's eyes.

‘Yes. *Me*. It does come as a bit of a shock, doesn’t it?’ He pulled his leg free and watched blank-faced as the last vestige of life left the centurion’s body, then closed the faceplate over his features. ‘Bring his corpse over to the gate. I want as many of them as possible to join our cause and encourage their comrades in the city to do the same, and having him laid out for inspection ought to be all the encouragement they need.’

I

Germania Inferior, March, AD 183

‘It might be your homeland, Julius, but I think it’s a shithole.’ The heavily built young centurion pulled his thick woollen cloak tighter about him, grimacing at the cold mist surrounding them on all sides. The fog, which muffled his voice and reduced visibility to barely fifty paces, gave the impression that the small party was being enveloped by thick grey walls. ‘The weather’s no better than in Britannia, the food’s worse than in Britannia, and the beer’s just piss.’

One of the other two officers marching alongside him flicked water out of his heavy black beard and snorted, wincing as the movement allowed a trickle of water to run down his back.

‘The last time I saw this place, Dubnus, was when I was fifteen. My memories of Tungrorum are so bloody dim that I doubt I’ll even recognise it when we get there. If we ever find it in this bloody murk.’

One of the three barbarians walking behind them snorted his own particular disgust.

‘Some fool told me that we were headed for Germania. All the time I was puking my guts up crossing the sea, and then when we were shivering in those freezing, louse-infested barracks through the winter, I consoled myself that I would soon be close to the land of my people, the land of the Quadi. A land of forests and rivers, teeming with game and watched over by my father’s gods. Instead of which –’ he lifted his hands to encompass the gently rolling land to either side of the road’s arrow-straight course – ‘I find myself trudging across interminable farmland

populated only by gangs of listless slaves and wreathed in vapour. This is *not* Germania; this bloody province is just one big field.'

The centurion marching on Dubnus's left turned round to face the barbarian and walked backwards, an amused smile on his angular, hawkish face.

'As it happens, Arminius, you've hit the nail squarely on the head. This part of Germania Inferior is just like Gallia Belgica to the south; it's almost entirely turned over to farming for corn. Good soil, or so my old tutor told me. If it wasn't for this province, and the farmland to the south, there'd be no legions based on the River Rhene to keep the German tribes in check, because there'd be no corn to feed them with.'

The barbarian shook his head in disbelief.

'Only *you*, Marcus Valerius Aquila, only you could take a complaint and turn it into a lesson on the workings of the empire.'

Julius kept marching, but his tone when he spoke was peremptory.

'Just stick to the name he's using now, Arminius, that or call him "Two Knives" like the soldiers do. Let his past sleep where it lies, because if you prod it hard enough it'll only wake up in a bad temper and give us all more grief. Our brother in arms is Marcus Tribulus Corvus, and we'll use that name whether we might be overheard or not. You know as well as I do what the penalty would be, were we found to be harbouring an imperial fugitive, in Britannia, in Germany or in any other part of the empire you'd like to mention.'

Another of the barbarian trio chuckled darkly, his one good eye winking at the subject of their discussion. With the wound that had ruined the other eye now healed he had dispensed with any attempt to hide the fresh, angry pink scar that cut the heavy brow into two separate parts. The eye socket itself was empty, a permanent reminder of a blood-fuelled night of revenge on his tribe's oppressors.

'Aye, especially a fugitive with such aristocratic blood.'

'And so says the only member of royalty actually present, eh, *Prince Martos*?'

The one-eyed man shook his head briskly at Dubnus's jibe.

'I forfeited my tribal rank when I turned away from the Dinpaladyr and marched south with you, just as you did when you turned away from your people to become part of the *civilised* world. Besides, my tribe has no need of my presence, not with a Roman garrison posted to watch the Fortress of Spears until such time as my nephew is ready to rule without their assistance. I'm better employed helping you keep this one –' he tipped his head at Marcus – 'out of the public eye.' Clenching one big fist and watching with a grin as the heavy muscle of his arm rippled in response, he shot the equally muscular Roman a lopsided smile. 'As if anyone's going to spare him a second glance when a one-eyed warrior built like one of your legion bathhouses is anywhere nearby.'

The third barbarian, taller than the other two by a full head, and with a heavy iron-beaked war hammer resting across one slab-like shoulder, gave a snigger of amusement so quiet that it might have passed unnoticed. The prince turned his head to focus his one good eye on the bigger man, a fierce scowl creasing his face as he snapped out a question in the language their two tribes shared.

'What's your problem, Lugos?'

Martos had yet to fully accept the giant as a member of the cohort's unofficial scout century, formed by the remnant of his Votadini warriors after their defeat by the Romans the previous year. Their capture had been a consequence of betrayal by the hulking tribesman's king, the leader of the Selgovae tribe, and Martos's view of the big man remained unmistakably jaundiced, but Lugos was clever enough to bide his time with the Votadini leader.

'There is no problem, Prince Martos. I simply listen, and in doing so I learn.'

Martos gave him a hard stare, but the giant's innocent look dampened his temper before it had the chance to boil over. Waiting until the prince had given up his fierce scrutiny, Lugos shot Marcus a swift wink. The Roman raised an eyebrow in

return and turned back to face the direction of their march, catching a conspiratorial glance from Dubnus as his friend resumed his attempts to goad Julius.

‘How far to the city now, Julius, do you think?’

The older man gave him a sideways look of disbelief.

‘Five minutes less than the last time you asked, I’d say. Why, do you need to empty your bladder, or is that spear wound playing you up again? You should have gone before we . . .’ He stopped, and put a hand on the hilt of his sword, pointing at the ground dimly visible to the right of the road’s path. ‘Do you see that?’

Out in the mist, at the point where distance made the movement nearly impossible to discern, something had risen from the mud surrounding them. As they watched, another figure rose from the ground close to the first, a human figure daubed liberally with mud. Dubnus shook his head, staring hard at the apparitions, then pointed into the fog on the other side of the road.

‘More of them!’

While the Romans stood and stared, a dozen and more of the unidentifiable figures rose to their feet around them, seeming to climb, wraithlike, straight out of the ground into the mist’s murk. Lugos broke the spell, stepping forward with his hammer gripped in two white-knuckled hands, barking out a single eager, angry word.

‘*Bandits!*’

The Romans looked at each other and drew their swords, Marcus pulling a long cavalry sword from the scabbard on his right hip to join the shorter gladius already held in his right hand. The gladius’s gold and silver eagle-head pommel gleamed dimly in the fog’s pale light. Dubnus pulled a throwing axe from his belt, tossing the weapon into the air and catching it by the handle’s base, ready to let it fly. They watched in silence as the figures moved closer, gradually taking on solid shapes as they closed their circle around the bemused group. Looking about him, Marcus saw that they were indeed men; their garments were worn and filthy, but each of them carried a sword or spear whose blades appeared well cared for.

‘Close enough, unless you want to find out what the point of my sword feels like as I slide it between your ribs!’

Their gradual advance stopped at Julius’s challenge, a single man stepping forward from their encircling line. What Marcus had taken for features set in stony resolution resolved themselves into the dull iron lines of a cavalry helmet, and when the man spoke his voice was distorted by the close-fitting face mask.

‘We are three times your strength. Lay down your arms and surrender your coin, and nobody gets hurt. Try to fight us and we’ll slaughter you like cattle.’

Julius stepped forward, sliding his gladius back into its scabbard and reaching into a pouch on his belt.

‘You’re right; there is a better way of settling this.’

Marcus and Dubnus exchanged knowing glances, and behind them Lugos growled softly, barely restraining himself from wading into the bandits single-handed. The centurion raised his hands, a flash of silver glinting in the swirling mist, and the masked bandit relaxed slightly, holding up an open hand to keep back his fellow robbers.

Julius’s face hardened into a predatory smile as he moved closer. ‘No, really, there’s no need for any of *us* to get hurt. You, on the other hand, should run. *Now*.’ He lifted a hand to his face, putting a shining whistle to his lips while the bandit leader scowled and raised his sword to fight. ‘No? I warned you . . .’

After blowing a single piercing note he dropped the whistle and ripped his dagger from its sheath, stepping in to attack the masked bandit with the weapon held low. His assailant swung his sword in a clumsy diagonal cut, aiming for the junction of the Roman’s head and neck, but Julius spun to his right and ducked under the blow, pushing his weight off his right foot and springing onto the bandit, bearing him to the ground and breaking his grip on the sword’s hilt. He rammed the dagger’s foot-long blade up into the bandit’s exposed left armpit and then, as the other man screamed with the agony of his wound, snapped his head down to deliver a crunching butt with his helmet’s brow guard, smashing a deep dent into the cavalry helmet’s iron face mask. Pushing

himself off the bandit's inert body he jumped back to his feet and swept his gladius from its scabbard again, turning to the nearest of the bandits with a broad smile.

Unable to contain himself any longer Lugos had already stepped off the road to confront two of the robbers, raising the hammer as if to bring it down on the nearest man's head, but then changing the attack at the last minute and sweeping the weapon's heavy iron beak into their legs. One of the pair dropped to the ground in crippled agony, forcing the other to jump back sharply. Pushed off balance by the sudden move the robber tripped and fell headlong backwards, his arms splayed out to either side. The huge barbarian hoisted the hammer over his head, swinging its vicious hooked blade down in a whistling arc to bury it deep in the fallen man's chest with a sickening crunch of splintering bones. As Martos and Arminius advanced to either side of him, the German swiftly finishing off the bandit felled by his first swing, the giant Briton put a foot on the dying man's stomach and tore the hammer's blade loose in a scatter of rib fragments, his eyes searching the mist for his next victim.

Marcus and Dubnus moved quickly to join Julius as he advanced into the throng of bandits, Dubnus hurling his axe in a spinning arc that ended with a wet, crunching thump of iron into flesh and bone before dodging a spear thrust from another man. He gripped the weapon's extended shaft to drag his assailant off balance, then, drawing his gladius, he thrust the blade deep into the spearman's thigh. Wrenching the weapon loose in a spray of blood he tore the spear from his victim's faltering grip, spun it a half turn over his head to present the blade and then stamped forward, slinging the spear to transfix another of the bandits edging towards them. Marcus took on a pair of swordsmen, feinting towards the first to back him up before spinning to attack the other head on. He steered the robber's sword aside with the gladius, then hacked the longer spatha in his other hand deep into the defenceless bandit's side. His opponent convulsed in agony as the cold iron sliced into his body, slumping to the ground as the Roman swung back to face the other man, the bloody

spatha pointing at the robber's chest as he backed slowly away. The bandits were looking at each other in silent amazement now, not yet willing to run from their intended prey but afraid to take the fight to them, given that so many of their own number were either dead or wounded.

For a moment silence ruled the open field, aside from a distant, rhythmic sound so faint as to be at the limit of audibility but rapidly gaining in volume, a metallic ripple that pulsed through the fog like the gnashing of a million tiny iron teeth. Julius smiled even wider, spreading his hands and turning on the spot to encompass them all as he spoke.

'You hear that? That, my friends, is the sound of your death rushing towards you! I'd say you've twenty heartbeats left, thirty at best, before a huge armoured monster comes out of this fog and tears you all to pieces. Either run now or make your peace with your gods.'

He paused, theatrically putting a cupped hand to his ear. The sound was swelling now, hardening, its distinct rhythm starting to disintegrate into one long clattering rattle. Marcus stared at the filthy, exhausted bandits around him, seeing every man's face reflect the same urge to run that they were all feeling. With a visible start one of the robbers realised what was happening; he turned to flee just as the first soldiers came out of the mist at the forced-march pace, their heads back to suck in the damp air. Marcus recognised the centurion running alongside the four-man-wide column as Clodius, at the exact moment that his colleague raised his drawn sword and bellowed an order at his men.

'Third Century, take them down!'

The bandits scattered in all directions, and the centurions watched in bemusement as the column's ordered ranks broke into organised chaos in the space of an instant, individual soldiers choosing their victims and going after them like hunting dogs. Each of the desperate men suddenly found himself pursued by half a dozen soldiers eager for blood, and the mist filled with the shouts and screams of hunter and hunted. One zealous soldier

ran at the three barbarian scouts with his spear raised, mistaking them for robbers in the heat of battle. A moment later he was staggering backwards, clutching his face, as Arminius, his face dark with anger, stepped forward to stop him dead with a swift jab of his massive fist. The unfortunate Tungrian fell onto his backside with blood streaming down his face.

‘You’ve broken by dose!’

The German shook his head contemptuously, gesturing back at his companions.

‘And whose fault is that? Just count yourself fortunate it was me and neither of these two that put you right. The prince would have gutted you like a fish, and the big lad would have taken off your head with the same punch. Now go and bleed somewhere else.’

Clodius walked across to his brother officers with a raised eyebrow, pulling off both his helmet and its padded linen liner, allowing the cold air to get to his grey-streaked hair. He watched as his men dragged the corpses of their victims back across the muddy fields.

‘I should have known you three would find some kind of trouble.’

Dubnus wiped his sword clean on the greasy fabric of a dead man’s tunic and sheathed the blade before replying.

‘It found us.’

Clodius grunted morosely.

‘Nothing new there. How’s your wound, young Dubnus? Still giving you problems when you get down on your knees for a . . . ?’ Catching a movement in the corner of his eye he half turned and then snapped out an order. ‘Third Century, stand at attention!’

Tribune Scaurus strolled into the knot of centurions with First Spear Sextus Frontinius in close attendance, returning their salutes while his deceptively soft grey eyes took in the scene about them.

‘I know we’re here to kill bandits, gentlemen, but given that we haven’t even reached Tungrorum yet this all seems a little keen, even by your standards.’ He looked around him at the litter

of scattered corpses and the few groaning survivors of the swift fight. 'And that, I have to say, seems to be that. Normally I'd be of the opinion that since we killed them we'd best burn or bury them, but under the circumstances . . .' He turned to Frontinius with a questioning look. 'What do you say, First Spear?'

The senior centurion limped across to the fallen body of the robbers' leader, pulling the cavalry helmet from the corpse's head to reveal the dead man's smashed face; the blood that had streamed from his broken nose was stark against the pale grey of his skin.

'I'd say he didn't find this helmet at the side of the road. I'd say he's probably killed enough good men that his death will please our gods. And I'd say that we leave him here to rot with the rest of his gang.'

Scaurus pursed his lips and nodded.

'Agreed. Strip them of their weapons and anything else of value, and load the survivors onto the supply carts. I'd imagine the authorities in Tungrorum will be happy enough to receive a few captured bandits for some public punishment.' He half turned away, then swung back to Frontinius with a swift nod. 'And that'll be enough of these gentlemen walking out in front of the cohort for one day. I don't mind losing officers in battle as long as they have the good grace to die expensively, but given we're already short of good centurions I won't risk making our problems any worse by tempting fate like that.' The 1st spear nodded, giving the three officers a significant stare. 'And what happened to him?'

A bandage carrier was fussing over the soldier whose nose had been broken by Arminius. The German stepped forward, nodding to Scaurus.

'He seemed set on putting his spear through me, so I changed his mind for him.'

The tribune raised an eyebrow at his bodyguard.

'You seem to have done rather too good a job of it, from what I can see.' He tapped the hapless medic on the shoulder, eliciting a flustered, bloody-fingered salute from the man. 'Either you get

that back in place now or you can deal with it at the end of the day. We've no time to be standing round in the mist while you work it out.'

The bandage carrier spread his wet and bloodied hands in apology.

'Sorry, Tribune, I just can't get a grip on the bone.'

Arminius pushed him aside without ceremony, putting a hand on the terrified soldier's shoulder to prevent him from rising.

'Stay put, you. This won't take a minute.' He grasped the soldier's nose, rubbing it briskly between finger and thumb to gauge the break's location. While the soldier was still squawking in pain at this rough treatment, the German took a handful of hair to hold his head in place and quickly manipulated the bone back into place. With a shrill scream of agony the soldier passed out, his weight suspended from the German's grip on his scalp. Shaking his head, Arminius pushed him into the bandage carrier's arms. 'It's done. He'll have a pair of black eyes for a week or so. It might teach him to pick his targets with a little more care.'

First Spear Frontinius nodded to his tribune, a wry smile touching his lips.

'It seems that your man has a way with mending broken bones, Tribune. Perhaps Centurion Corvus's wife might do well to recruit him for her clinic?'

Scaurus shook his head, watching the German walk away.

'I think not. He's more than a little lacking in the delicate approach required of a medical man. He's been that way ever since I saved him from the sword back in the war with the Quadi, and I can't see him changing now.' He turned to look at the road ahead, still wreathed in drifting curtains of mist. 'Well, then, shall we get these cohorts back on the road? I'd estimate there's still another ten miles to the city, and there'll be no respite from this cursed drizzle until we get there.'

As the leading centuries formed back into their marching column Marcus noted that Julius was scanning the ground around the corpse of the bandit group's leader.

'Lost something?'

His friend nodded, keeping his eyes on the ground.

‘My whistle. It was a nice one too.’

Glancing about him, Marcus caught Dubnus’s eye, and saw that he was pointing ostentatiously at his own belt pouch and grinning smugly. Giving up the search, Julius turned back to his colleagues to find Dubnus apparently searching the ground at his feet with exaggerated interest.

‘I could do with a nice whistle; mine sounds like a castrated cat.’

The older man shook his head in disgust as the 3rd Century, set to lead the long two-cohort-strong column of march, started to move again at Clodius’s bellow of command.

‘Very funny, Dubnus. I suppose that’s the price I have to pay for being first into the fight. As per *fucking* usual.’

He stamped away to join his own 5th Century, leaving the two friends to wait for their men to march past.

‘How long will you hold onto it?’

Dubnus shrugged at Marcus’s question.

‘Until he’s bought a new one? I’ll sneak it back into his pouch once he’s laid out some coin for a replacement.’ He frowned at his friend’s sudden solemnity. ‘*What?* It’s not like I’ve lifted his purse!’

Marcus shook his head.

‘No, it’s me. I was just thinking how funny Rufius was going to find this.’

Dubnus put a spade-like hand on his friend’s mailed shoulder.

‘I know. I miss the old bastard almost as much as you do, but life, as Morban keeps telling anyone that will listen, is for those left around to profit from it. And here come your boys now. Go and cheer up Qadir with the story of our colleague’s whistle. You know he always turns grumpy when it’s too wet for his lads to play with their bows.’

After another four hours of marching, all of it through an afternoon made into premature twilight by the swirling mist, even Marcus was ready for the day’s journey to end. Marching

alongside his chosen man, Qadir, at his century's rear, he noted that the usually imperturbable Hamian's demeanour became grimmer as the day progressed.

'I'm going up to the front to make sure Morban's not bullying the trumpeter too badly.'

The Hamian grunted in reply, his eyes locked on the gloomy landscape fitfully revealed by the mist's drifting grey curtains.

Marching up to the century's head, the Roman found his standard bearer, a twenty-five-year veteran famed for both his acerbic wit and his prodigious appetites for gambling, drinking and whoring, in reflective mood on the subject of their colleague's unhappiness.

'I tried to cheer him up at the lunch stop with a few jokes, but he wasn't having any of it. Perhaps he's starting to realise what him and his mates tossed away when they decided not to stay with the Hamian cohort back on the Wall. Carting around half their weight in iron can't be much fun when they're more used to prancing round the forest wearing next to nothing and shooting the occasion animal for the pot.' Oblivious to his centurion's icy stare, he ploughed on. 'And now here he is, freezing cold, water dripping from the end of his nose and his bow hidden away for days on end for fear of the glue rotting. No wonder the poor bastard's feeling miserable. Not like us, we're used to this.' Marcus stared out into the mist, shaking his head slightly at the realisation that Morban's view of what might be affecting Qadir's mood could just as easily be applied to his own situation. 'Anyway, we'll be tucked up in this new place's barracks soon enough, with a few logs in the stove and all this nastiness behind us. And if dear old Qadir can't take a joke then perhaps he shouldn't have—'

The standard bearer's sentiment was interrupted by a shout from further up the column, which promptly came to a halt in a succession of shouted commands from each centurion down the cohort's column. Hearing the century in front of his own being told to halt Marcus shouted the same command to his men, then barked a terse order to Qadir to watch the ranks and walked forward to see what was happening. He passed the back of the

leading century and the reason for the unscheduled halt became clear: a twenty-foot-high stone wall loomed out of the mist. A group of bemused centurions were gathered around a pair of massive wooden gates set in an imposing stone archway that barred the cohorts' route into the city. The first spear was craning his neck to call up to a pair of soldiers who in turn were peering down into the mist with looks of deep suspicion.

'Just open the bloody gates and we'll worry about the paperwork later. I've got two full cohorts of soldiers slowly freezing their balls off out here, and I want them in barracks before dark.'

Julius, who was standing behind the senior centurion with a grim look on his dark, bearded face, shook his head at Marcus.

'This isn't going to end well. Those are legion troops if I'm not mistaken, and whenever the road menders get involved there's usually grief.'

Another soldier appeared on the walls, this one wearing the feathered and crested helmet of a legion chosen man. He spoke to the guards for a moment, then leaned out and called down to the auxiliaries gathered below.

'I'm sorry, Centurion. I'm under strict orders not to open the gates without permission from my own officer. I've sent one of my men to find him, but until he gets here there's no way I can let you in.'

He spread his hands to convey his helplessness with the situation, and then disappeared from sight to leave the first spear fuming with anger.

'Was that segmented armour I saw before that man went to hide from the wrath of an infuriated first spear?'

The centurions turned to find Tribune Scaurus standing behind them with a questioning look on his face. Frontinius nodded grimly, his face creased with anger.

'Yes, Tribune. It would appear that the regulars have got here before us.'

Scaurus looked out into the swirling mist for a moment.

'And I suppose that if we leave this to take its apparent course, the men could be standing around here for quite a while.'

Frontinius nodded again, the angry lines of his expression softening as he turned a quizzical gaze on his superior.

The tribune nodded at him, cleared his throat, and shouted up at the apparently deserted wall.

‘Chosen Man! Show yourself!’ After a long silence the chosen man looked over the wall again, his face falling when he saw the tribune staring up at him. Scaurus lifted his cloak, showing the other man his finely wrought bronze plate armour, sculpted to resemble a muscled torso. *‘Have a good look, Chosen Man! You’ll observe that I’m not a centurion but the commander of these cohorts, and not without influence, or an understanding of how things work. Which legion might this be that I’m talking with, I wonder? Either the “grunts” or the “scribblers”, I’d guess. Which is it, Chosen Man?’*

The chosen man sprang to attention.

‘First Minervia Faithful and Loyal, Tribune!’

Scaurus smiled, muttering quietly to himself.

‘Got you.’ He looked up at the chosen man for a long moment before speaking again. *‘The “grunts”, then. First Minervia, Faithful and Loyal. A proud name for a proud legion. Tell me, Chosen Man, is that sour-faced old bastard Gladio still First Spear of the Third Cohort?’*

The chosen man squinted down at him, clearly wondering just how much influence this unknown tribune might have with his own officers. His answer was carefully balanced to avoid giving any potential offence.

‘Yes, sir. He’s still as cheerful as he ever was.’

Calculating that the moment to attack had arrived, Scaurus raised his voice to an enraged bellow.

‘Well, if I’m not through those fucking gates before I’ve counted to thirty, you’ll soon find out that I’m a good deal less sunny of character than he is, and a good deal more vindictive! Do you understand me?’ The chosen man nodded unhappily. *‘Good. Then let’s get on with it, shall we? Or do I actually have to embarrass us both by starting to count?’*

After a few seconds of silence the chosen man turned and

disappeared, and a moment later the gate's man-sized wicket gate yawned open. Shooting a glance at his first spear, Scaurus stepped forward.

'I'll go and get this sorted out before the cohorts freeze to death.'

Frontinius pointed to the group of centurions, gesturing them forward with a jerk of his thumb.

'Centurions Julius, Dubnus and Corvus, you can provide the tribune with an escort. There's no telling what sort of person's running around behind those walls, given that there's a legion involved.'

The men guarding the gate made to close the man-sized door as Scaurus stepped through it, but a firm shove from Julius held it open, while his fierce glare dissuaded them from any thought of objecting to the presence of the tribune's escort. The hulking Tungrian stared about him with a curled lip before addressing the chosen man.

'If you toy soldiers are supposed to be keeping the city safe you're not doing much of a job of it. We've got several wounded men on wagons out there, all that's left of a score or so of bandits who tried to ambush us on the road. You might want to bring them in for medical attention before they die of cold and deny the people of this city the chance to watch them being executed.' Shaking his head he turned away, staring unhappily into the mist that wreathed the ground inside the city's wall; it was just as impenetrable as it had been outside. 'Now, which way to the headquarters building?'

The chosen man waved his men back to the warmth of their guard house before pointing down the road that continued from the gate into the city's murky interior.

'That way, Centurion. But don't be looking for a headquarters. This is a civilian settlement, not a fort. Go down there for a quarter mile or so and you'll come to a crossroads. The big building on the right is the forum, and, at a guess, you'll find the officers there, in the basilica.'

The three centurions formed a protective cordon around

Scaurus as the party walked forward. Dubnus put a hand on the hilt of his sword, muttering nervously as he stared out into the fog.

‘Four hundred paces to the middle of the city? That would make this place bigger than the Sixth Legion’s fortress at Yew Grove. It’s . . .’

‘Enormous?’ A gentle smile was playing on Scaurus’s face as he looked with interest at the buildings looming out of the fog on either side of the road. ‘This is a provincial centre, Centurion. There are perhaps eight or ten thousand people inside these walls, or at least there would have been before the plague came. There are at least a hundred times as many in Rome, and yet Rome’s walls are only three times as long. Which makes you wonder what they’re doing with all the space.’

In the murk ahead of them a pair of blazing torches indicated the entrance to the forum, with a pair of sentries standing guard in front of the high archway. Before the tribune had any chance to explain their presence to the surprised soldiers a legion centurion walked out of the courtyard beyond them, stopping with a start of surprise when he saw the newcomers. Staring with narrowed eyes at the three centurions’ unfamiliar armour and crested helmets, he was further taken aback when he realised who it was they were escorting. Scaurus allowed the silence to play out for a few seconds, watching the calculation in the legion officer’s face before speaking in an acerbic tone designed to communicate his status.

‘Yes, Centurion, this is a senior officer’s uniform, and yes, Centurion, you’re supposed to have your hand in the air some time about now.’

The other man saluted quickly, his face reddening with embarrassment, while the sentries worked hard but not entirely successfully at keeping the smirks off their faces.

‘I’m sorry, Prefect, it’s just that we weren’t expecting to receive any reinforcement.’

Marcus looked at Julius, wondering if his colleague was going to correct the legion man’s mistaken identification, but his

questioning gaze was answered only by a slight shake of the big man's head. Scaurus nodded to the centurion, looking over his shoulder at the dimly visible administrative building on the other side of the forum's open courtyard.

'That's perfectly understandable, Centurion, because we're not reinforcements. If you'll show me to your tribune . . .?'

The centurion led them across the forum's wide, paved expanse, around which the city's merchants would gather to tout their wares in better weather, and into the warmth of the basilica. Realising that he was on the back foot, he made a belated effort to regain some sense of the dominance to be expected in the relationship between a legion and its supporting auxiliary cohorts.

'And now, gentlemen, if I might ask you to leave your weapons here before you go through for your interview with the tribune—'

Scaurus cut him off in a flat tone, looking about the entrance hall at the rich wall hangings and an elaborate mosaic of Mercury stretched out across the floor.

'No, Centurion, you might not. I've neither the time nor the patience at the moment.'

He walked past the astonished officer and through the hall, his hobnailed boots rapping harshly against the mosaic's delicate surface, and after a second's hesitation his centurions followed in a clatter of iron. Dubnus winked at the disgruntled legion centurion, and muttered from the side of his mouth.

'Just be grateful you're not left holding his cloak like a uniformed doorman.'

Pushing open the doors at the entrance hall's far end, the Tungrians walked into a high-ceilinged chamber dominated by a massive table, around which were sitting several men in the crisp white tunics of legion officers and two civilians dressed in togas. They looked round curiously at the unexpected entry, and the youngest of them got to his feet with a look of annoyance on his face, tapping the senatorial stripe adorning his tunic. The Tungrian centurions snapped to attention and saluted

crisply, while Scaurus fiddled with his cloak pin, tossing the thick woollen garment onto a chair and revealing his finely wrought breastplate. The young tribune flicked his eyes across the centurions' mail armour, and his mouth tightened fractionally in response to his prompt assessment of the newcomers.

'You're auxiliaries, I presume?' he said. Scaurus nodded tersely, looking back at the man with a level gaze. 'Which would make *you* a prefect? And I have a tendency to insist on the finer points of military etiquette, *Prefect*. Such as the expectation that even officers should salute their seniors.'

The young tribune's voice was reasonable enough, but he spoke in a manner which indicated he had grown accustomed to being listened to more than he listened. To Marcus's trained eye he appeared the model of a legion senior officer, a man in his mid-twenties with fashionably long hair, his beard grown thick and bushy in emulation of the imperial fashion but nevertheless glossy and neatly trimmed. His eyes, hard with their challenge to the unknown officer standing before him, were set close above a classically Roman nose, down which he was looking with an expression of sorely tried patience. Scaurus looked at him with a level gaze for a moment, reaching into his satchel and pulling out a scroll. When he spoke his voice was dry and without any hint of recognition of the other man's professed superiority in rank.

'I heartily agree, *colleague*. I was saying just the same thing to a young legion tribune of senatorial rank only a few weeks ago, when he happened to come under my command, and before he died nobly in battle beside me.' Watching the legion officers, Marcus noted their various widened eyes and intakes of breath, the signs of men hearing the unexpected. Scaurus shook his head slightly, holding the scroll loosely in one hand. 'You don't believe in getting your facts straight before you open your mouth though, do you, *colleague*?' The other man turned pale, but as he opened his mouth to speak again Scaurus walked around the table and went face to face with him, his grey eyes suddenly stone hard, and his voice a low murmur that forced the other man to listen intently to make out the words.

‘This is that interesting, perhaps life-defining, moment, Tribune, that we all encounter when we least expect it, that moment of truth when the pit opens up before us, and we have only to step forward to be in it up to our neck. Do you have any questions you might want to ask me before we get down to the good old-fashioned contest to see which of us has the bigger cock? Any doubts as to which of us might end up raising his hand in respect at the end of that conversation?’

The legion tribune shook his head, clearly holding onto his rage by a fine thread.

‘I am Lucius Domitius Belleter, Military Tribune commanding the Seventh Cohort of Imperial Legion First Minervia, on detached duty to safeguard the city of Tungrorum. I have orders from my legion’s legatus to command the services of any and all suitable forces that come within my reach. Which means you, and your men, *Prefect*.’

He raised an eyebrow at Scaurus, who, holding his gaze, replied in a louder tone than before, ensuring that all of the men around the table could hear him.

‘Very well. I am Military Tribune Gaius Rutilius Scaurus, commanding the First and Second Tungrian Cohorts and on detached duty from the army of Britannia to seek and eliminate bandits, deserters and rebels from the province of Germania Inferior. I have orders from the governor of Britannia not to allow my force to fall under the command of any other officer unless I deem this to be in the interests of pursuing my given orders. Perhaps he foresaw just such an eventuality as this one.’ Belleter opened his mouth to speak, but Scaurus held up a hand. ‘I can see I haven’t yet convinced you, and I see nothing to be gained from our discussing this matter in public. Perhaps we ought to ask our colleagues and these other gentlemen to leave us alone for a few minutes?’

Belleter nodded slowly and turned back to the legion centurions, who were, to a man, gaping in silent amazement at the drama playing out before their eyes.

‘Leave us.’

The officers rose and headed for the door through which the Tungrians had entered, followed after an embarrassing pause by the two civilians. Julius, last to leave the room, closed the heavy oak doors and, spotting a thick curtain clearly designed to improve the privacy of the room, drew it across them.

‘I’m guessing you’re the senior man here?’

He turned to face the speaker, a grizzled man with broad shoulders and big hands, his face riven by a heavy scar that ran from his right eyebrow down across his upper cheek, bisecting his lips and reaching down to the point of his chin. Julius braced himself for the expected torrent of abuse, and both Dubnus and Marcus shifted their stances fractionally, subconsciously positioning themselves to fight. The speaker raised his eyebrows and lifted his hands to forestall any argument although he didn’t, Marcus noted, step back from the challenge.

‘No, there’s no need for you to feel threatened. We’re all on the same side here. I’m Sergius, First Spear of the Seventh Cohort.’ He put out a hand, and Julius shook it without hesitation. ‘Whatever’s going on in there probably has to be said between the two of them and then forgotten, so it’s best we’re out of earshot, right?’

Julius nodded, finding himself starting to warm to the other man despite the unfulfilled expectation of hostility.

‘I’m Julius, Centurion, First Tungrian Auxiliary Cohort, and these two are Dubnus and Corvus. Our first spear’s waiting at the west gate with the rest of the men. Any chance we could get them inside before it gets dark?’

Without the restrictions of an audience of their subordinates, Belleter promptly went on the offensive, putting his finger in Scaurus’s face and spitting a stream of fury at him.

‘How fucking *dare* you speak to me that way in front of my officers?’

The older man smiled into his anger, shaking his head.

‘You brought it on yourself, *colleague*. A simple quiet question or two would have shown you the real position of status between

us, rather than what you'd like it to be. But let's ignore your inability to ask questions before throwing your weight around.'

'My legatus will hear about this soon enough! I'll have you—'

Scaurus stepped forward, his face white with anger, putting his face inches away from the other man's and making him take an involuntary step backwards.

'That was the wrong choice of words, Tribune! Any sorting out between us is going to be done here, *between* us. Put any idea of using your legatus to deal with me out of your mind, because I'm here and he *isn't*! I've dealt with *your* type of officer before, and I've learned that allowing your type of *officer* to delude yourselves only brings more grief than shattering your illusions nice and early. The days when even the least capable man with senatorial rank could tell veteran field commanders with equestrian rank what to do are dying away, Domitius Belletor. And as far as I'm concerned, in this particular small corner of the empire they may as well never have existed.'

He picked up the scroll from the table in front of him.

'First, Tribune, my orders, which were handed to me by my provincial governor, *insist* that I operate independently of any other command unless I choose to do otherwise. Secondly, Tribune, the facts are that you've less than half my strength in spears and you've been given the Seventh, one of the traditionally weaker cohorts in any legion. Your command is highly likely to be packed with raw recruits and boys barely out of the first year's training. And thirdly, *Tribune*, my perceptions of your achievements, if I'm being blunt, are that you've done little more since you got here than line the walls of this city with your troops. My officers were assaulted by a score of bandits little more than ten miles from these walls, and none of them showed any of the fear for our uniforms that I would have expected if your men were patrolling with anything like the necessary vigour. My two cohorts are hardened from recent battle in the barbarian uprising across the water in Britannia, and I have no intention of wasting their abilities by allowing them to sit around and go soft under your command.'

Belletoor shook his head decisively, still refusing to concede the point, his lip curling in amazed contempt.

‘I am a *legion* tribune! That automatically gives me the right to command you, a mere auxiliary! Anything else is simply—’

To his obvious fury, Scaurus had turned his back and walked away from him, his boots rattling against the floor’s flagstones as he examined the murals decorating the walls. He replied without turning to face the other man, his voice rich with irony.

‘A *legion* tribune? I’ve stood in your boots as a *legion* tribune, but that was years ago, in the wars against the Quadi. I know how much power a broad-stripe tribune has, Domitius Belletoor, hemmed in between the legion’s *legatus* and the more experienced narrow-stripe tribunes and their senior centurions, all of whom expect the right to tell you what to do. I’ve been fighting for the empire for the last ten years in one province or another, and I’ve earned my *second* tribunate the hard way, with this.’ He tapped the hilt of his sword. ‘So, far from being your subordinate, Tribune, I consider myself at worst your equal, and, in terms of my command’s strength and abilities, my own training, and my combat experience, clearly your superior. You’re free to play the big man with the local officials to your heart’s content, and you’re probably wise to keep your men behind these nice thick walls and out of harm’s way, but if you lift one finger to impede me as I go about ridding this province of the men preying upon it you will find me a very dangerous enemy indeed. You choose.’

Sergius nodded to Julius’s request, and before resuming the conversation he sent one of his colleagues to deal with the matter of getting the Tungrian cohorts inside the city’s walls. The two civilians were keeping themselves to themselves in one corner of the entrance hall. The taller of the two, well built and with a haughty look about him, was talking intently with his colleague, a leaner man with a look of sharp intelligence.

‘Our boy’s got a bit of a temper, I’m afraid.’

Sergius’s knowing smile betrayed his feelings on the subject, and Julius found himself warming to the legion officer.

‘Ours too, but we hardly ever see it.’

Sergius chuckled quietly, his voice low to avoid it being carried in the lobby’s quiet to the men at the door.

‘Which makes you pay attention when he displays it, eh? Whereas we’re all worn down by Tribune Belletor’s incessant rages, to the point where he’s become something of an amusement to the cohort.’

Julius frowned.

‘So what’s he doing here?’

‘Can’t you guess? Tribune Belletor’s daddy is very well connected, and very rich. That’s how his lad got a legion tribunate, and that’s why our legatus has to tolerate him, if he knows what’s good for him. The orders to send a cohort down here provided the big man with the perfect excuse to get a bit of peace and quiet.’

Julius’s face took on a pained expression.

‘But the Seventh Cohort? Surely this isn’t a job for raw troops?’

‘I couldn’t agree more, but you wouldn’t find the legatus signing up to that point of view. First Minervia’s still under strength, what with all the men that died of the plague and the lack of young lads to replace them, given the number of civilians that died at the same time. We’ve already had to send three cohorts off to reinforce the army in Britannia after some idiot managed to lose the best part of a legion . . .’ The look on Julius’s face stopped him in mid-flow. ‘What?’

‘We were there, First Spear. And it wasn’t pretty.’

Sergius shrugged.

‘It never is. I was a green centurion when the last war with the Chauci started, and it took a lot less than a year for me to go from being desperate to get into the fight to being happy if I never saw another dead barbarian, as long as I didn’t have to watch any more of my men die. Anyway, three cohorts to Britannia, another two sent to the coast to help the “scribblers” keep our boot on the Chauci’s throat . . .’

‘Scribblers?’

‘The Thirtieth Legion, Ulpia Victorious. Our sister legion in

this province. When the call goes out for men to help with manual work it usually gets directed our way, whereas they seem to get all the reading and writing work. If the governor's office needs twenty clerks to sit around scratching their arses they get the job, and if there's a forest that needs cutting down they call for us. They call us "grunts", and we call them "scribblers", and it's been that way for as long as I've served. So, we're five cohorts down before we consider upkeep on the fortress, men on leave and the usual long list of malingerers, which means that a cohort was all our legatus could spare. Even with that small a loss of manpower the legion will be deep in the shit if the hairy boys that live on the other side of the Rhene decide to come across in any numbers. So he sent us, as fine a collection of half-trained soldiery as ever hid behind a shield, and he was probably happy to see the back of us. And Tribune Belleter.'

Julius conceded the point.

'Understandable. But surely five hundred of you ought to be able to scare the bandits back into their holes?'

Sergius glanced at his brother officers, a wry smile lighting up his face.

'And that's exactly what we thought when we got here six weeks ago. Send a couple of centuries out to garrison the roads and they'll soon enough wind their necks in, but . . .'

The doors to the chamber opened and Scaurus pushed his way through the curtain.

'Right, gentlemen, let's go and get our soldiers bedded down for the night.' Pausing to fasten his cloak about him before stepping back into the cold air, he spoke to the civilians in passing. 'My apologies, gentlemen, for rushing off so quickly, but it seems the available barracks are all full of the legion's men, and so I must find a spot inside your walls to pitch my cohorts' tents. I'll be back here early tomorrow morning though, and then we can discuss how to start dealing with the thieves that have made life so awkward for you these past few months. That and what I'll need from you to feed and shelter fourteen hundred fighting men.'



‘How long can we keep the men in these conditions? In this weather?’ First Spear Frontinius pulled a thoughtful face. ‘Days. A week at best. The tents have taken a bit of a beating already, and with this much moisture in the air they’ll start falling to pieces sooner rather than later. We need to get the men into proper barracks, stone built for preference, but wood will do if there’s nothing better. Perhaps the legion will help us? After all, aren’t First Minervia supposed to be good at that sort of thing? Their tribune may not be cut from the finest cloth, but the officers sound experienced enough, from what Julius told me earlier.’

Scaurus took a sip of his wine before answering his first spear’s musing. He made a point of consulting the older man most nights, having found him a source of sound advice in the months since taking command of the Tungrians. His thin face was set in contemplative lines.

‘Perhaps they will help us, but I won’t be pinning my hopes on it. As for the officers, this Tribune Belleter is an idiot, pure and simple, the sort of man that gives the aristocracy a bad name. His centurions seem a decent enough lot, but I don’t see much fire in their guts. They’ve seen battle, but not any time recently. I don’t know about you, but I’ve found that combat experience has a tendency to make or break the man. It can make him stronger, and bring his best points to the fore, or it can just as easily blunt his edge. The First Minervia hasn’t seen a decent fight in ten years now, and that’s a long time for a man to brood on the things he’s seen and done. I think I’d be a bit happier if Tribune Belleter was commanding a few centurions with less friendliness but more recent scars, if you know what I mean. Anyway, it is what it is, so we’d better make the best of it. At least the governor managed to send us to a place where the name *Aquila* isn’t on every man’s lips. With a little luck it’ll have thrown any more imperial agents off the scent for the time being, and we can forget about that particular risk.’

The first spear raised his cup.

‘I’ll drink to that. As, I’d imagine, would Centurion Corvus.’

Scaurus drank, and then sat back in his chair, stretching wearily in the light of a pair of oil lamps.

‘Speaking of Corvus, did the doctor manage to keep alive those bandits we captured?’

‘She managed to keep some of them breathing, four at the last count. Another two died from their wounds on the way here.’

The tribune’s gloomy expression lightened a little.

‘Good. That’ll give me something to lighten the mood when I upset the municipal authorities in the morning.’

‘This is simply outrageous, Tribune Scaurus! You have absolutely no right to commandeer private property in this way! I shall be writing to the governor about this, and when I’ve finished he won’t be in any doubt as to the sort of officer with which the authorities in Britannia have saddled Tungrorum. You are rapacious, unprincipled, and no better than the bandits who are bleeding us dry from outside our walls. At least we can keep *them* out! This city is only just getting off its knees after the plague killed a third of its inhabitants, we’re still not taking enough in tax to satisfy the empire’s requirements of my office, and now you march up demanding that a civilian population of seven thousand people should feed nearly two thousand soldiers. All of whom seem to eat like gladiators, if I’m to judge from this supply requirement of yours! *No!* I simply cannot agree to these demands!’

Procurator Albanus scowled across the wide table at Scaurus, his bearded face contorted with righteous anger, and he slapped his hand down on the table with a loud crack before turning away in apparent fury. Scaurus glanced across the table at his colleague Belletor, noting that the other man was unsuccessfully attempting to suppress a smirk. Belletor’s senior centurion, Sergius, was stone-faced alongside his tribune, while the procurator’s clerk was avoiding Scaurus’s eye, his head bent over his tablet as he sat in his place at the procurator’s left hand. On Albanus’s right sat his colleague of the previous evening, a wiry man with a thick mane of dark brown hair, who was wearing a long-sleeved tunic, his

face shaved smooth in defiance of the prevailing fashion and his eyes hard stones in a face which seemed to be blessed with a talent for complete immobility of expression. Introduced by Albanus in a perfunctory manner as Petrus, he appeared to be the procurator's deputy, although he had made no contribution to the discussion, apparently happy to sit and watch as the meeting played out.

The last man at the table had slipped into the room and taken a seat between the two sides of the debate just after Albanus had started his tirade of complaint at Scaurus's requirements five minutes earlier, and was yet to be introduced. His cloak, discarded over the back of the chair next to him, was flecked with mud, and his damp and muddied leggings bore further witness to his having recently arrived from elsewhere. As he glanced around the table with a questioning look Scaurus noted that one of his green eyes had a slight squint, an effect he found vaguely disconcerting. Shaking his head slightly the tribune got to his feet, the sound of his hobnailed boots muffled by straw matting laid out over the complex mosaic. He reached out a hand to the newcomer.

'Before I reply to Procurator Albanus I ought to introduce myself. Rutilius Scaurus, Tribune commanding the First and Second Tungrian Cohorts.'

The other man smiled, taking the offered clasp.

'With passions running so high I doubt anyone will think to introduce me, so I'll return the favour myself. I'm the governor's prefect with responsibility for ridding the province of bandits, on detachment from Fortress Bonna. Quintus Caninus.' He shot a meaningful glance at Albanus, who was looking at him disdainfully. 'Procurator Albanus has a low enough opinion of me, and I've only got thirty men to feed and house, so it's no wonder he's got excited at the sight of two more full cohorts inside his walls.'

Albanus snorted his derision.

'Thirty men I can live with, and even the horses we have to feed and stable. A cohort of legionaries at least provides us with

security against the thieves that the army seems unable to control. But two more whole cohorts to feed? And now this . . . *gentleman* . . . is demanding that we also build barracks for fourteen hundred men! I find myself—'

Scaurus, having picked up his first spear's vine stick from the table where it rested in front of him, and with a look of apology to Sextus Frontinius, smashed it down onto the flat surface with a terrific bang. He stared hard at the shocked procurator for a long moment of complete silence, ignoring the incensed glances that Belletor was shooting at him.

'Is that it?' The procurator goggled at him in silent amazement, while his colleague Petrus stared up at the angry tribune with a look of interest. 'Good! Thank you, Procurator Albanus, for making your views on the subject so clear. You've made a most lyrical defence of your desire not to provide my men with either shelter from the elements or food in their bellies, despite the fact that they've been sent to protect *you* and your people from the bandits who have been preying upon them for months. And now I think it's time we heard from someone other than a *coin counter*! Prefect Caninus, I'd be grateful to hear your views on the subject of exactly what it is that we're facing.'

Caninus got up from his place at the table, pulling a hanging curtain aside to reveal a detailed map of the area around the city painted onto the wall behind it.

'Very well, Tribune, this is my assessment of the current position with regard to the bandit threat to this part of the province. First, consider the geography of the area. Tungrorum is here, right in the middle of everything that matters for the province.' Frontinius frowned, and Caninus raised an eyebrow. 'You have a question, First Spear?'

Frontinius nodded, pointing at the map with his vine stick.

'Where I come from, ground is only important if it allows the man that holds it to control something. What makes this place so important?'

Albanus raised his eyes to the ceiling, but Caninus continued, warming to his subject.

‘A good question. What makes this city in the middle of nowhere of any interest to anyone? There’s a simple answer, First Spear. Roads. Look, I’ll show you.’ He pointed to the map. ‘To the west, the road runs across easy ground to Beech Forest, the Nervian capital, and from there down into Gaul. And it runs through miles and miles of fertile soil, fields of grain for as far as the eye can see.’ He indicated a spot on the map to the east of the city. ‘From Tungrorum that same road runs east for a half-day’s march to cross the river at Mosa Ford, and then continues all the way to Claudius Colony on the River Rhene. From there the road runs along the river’s western bank to all of the major towns and fortresses on the river.’

He stopped speaking and looked at Frontinius, who was studying the map with fresh understanding.

‘So the grain from Gaul is shipped up the road to Tungrorum, then on to the fortresses on the Rhene?’

‘Exactly, First Spear. The journey’s too long for carters in Gaul to go all the way to the Rhene, so they bring the grain here to the grain store –’ Albanus snorted again, but the prefect continued speaking without any sign of having heard him – ‘where it can be collected and shipped to the east. Without grain from Gaul the fortresses on the Rhene would be unsustainable, and without the legions camped on the river the Germans would be across the border and raiding deep into our land in no time.’

‘And without Germania Inferior the whole of Gaul would be wide open. Not to mention the road to Rome.’

Caninus smiled broadly.

‘You’ve a sharp mind, First Spear. As you say, without the supply of grain to the fortresses on the Rhene, the empire’s entire north-western flank would be wide open to barbarian attack. Within fifty years they’d have settled Germania Inferior and be knocking on the door of Gaul. Not to mention the fact that not defending the lower stretches of the Rhene would put the defences along the upper reaches of the river under threat of attack. Tungrorum is absolutely critical to the maintenance of control over the German tribes. And Tungrorum is under a threat

whose severity Procurator Albanus seems determined to underestimate in favour of commercial concerns.'

He looked directly at the procurator, waiting for him to deny the accusation, but the administrator stared intently at the table, clearly determined to ignore the provocation. Scaurus waved a hand at the wall.

'Tell us about the bandit threat, Prefect. I'm curious to know why it hasn't already been stamped out, if the supply route to the frontier is of such critical importance.'

Caninus pointed to the map again, indicating an area to the south and east of the city.

'March to the east for ten miles and cross the River Mosa, and you'll find yourself confronted with a vast forest that rises from the river's edge to form a range of hills. It's impossible ground to police, riven by deep river valleys and covered with dense woodland where the light of day barely reaches the ground. When it's not raining the hills are wreathed in mist, and it's as cold as the grave at this time of the year. And that is the root of our problem, Tribune. The locals call it the Forest of Arduenna, after their goddess of the high woods. She rides a boar to hunt, they say.'

'A German Diana, then?'

'Yes, Tribune, apart from her association with high ground. The forest is littered with shrines to her name, hunters invoking her good favour in the main, although there are rumours of a darker side to her worship. Human sacrifices . . .' He paused, touching an amulet that hung from his right wrist. 'Not that we've found any sign of the kind of sacrificial altars you'd expect if the rumours are based in fact, but . . .'

Scaurus nodded, his face set hard.

'When we had men captured in the war with the Quadi it wasn't unusual for the tribesmen to sacrifice them to their gods, usually slowly, and often within screaming distance of our camps. Let's hope your amulet brings you protection. So, tell me, what have you achieved against these bandits?'

Albanus jumped to his feet, suddenly livid at the question.

‘Nothing! Exactly nothing at all! We house these men at the governor’s request, we provide them with stabling, and yet—’

‘*Procurator!*’ Scaurus’s voice was cold, and his tone not that of a man likely to brook any argument. The civilian looked at him, his mouth open. ‘I promise you, in fact I swear to Mithras Unconquered, that if you interject your nonsensical gabbling into this conference one more time I will have you ejected from the room. Keep your mouth shut, so that those of us who have to go *outside* these walls and hunt down the men putting the empire’s entire northern frontier at risk can work out what is to be done!’ He held the administrator’s gaze until the other man looked away, while his clerk stared with even greater intensity at his notes. Petrus, the first spear noted, didn’t so much as flicker an eyelid; he simply watched Scaurus with the same closed expression. The tribune waited another moment to make sure his point had been made, then gestured to the waiting Caninus. ‘Prefect? Do please continue.’

Caninus looked at the map in silence for a moment, shaking his head ruefully.

‘You want to know what we’ve done? Everything we can, given our resources, but nowhere near enough. We patrol the roads as frequently as we can, capturing and killing the occasional small band of robbers, but the real threat is still out there. And why, you ask? Why haven’t we already ground them into the mud of the flat open fields that border the road for as far as the eye can see? There are two reasons, and if I have your measure you already know very well what the bigger of the two has to be.’

Scaurus nodded.

‘I think I know the first of them as well, but please continue.’

‘The first is simple enough. All the way through the war with the Marcomanni and the Quadi, a war which only really ended two years ago, no matter what the victory coins might have said before that, this province was bled of men and gold to fund the campaign’s insatiable appetite for blood and treasure. The legions on the lower Rheneus are stripped to the bone, capable of little more than guarding the frontier; and the farm owners are taxed

to the hilt to make up the financial shortfall caused by the plague, so they drive their slaves like animals. As a consequence of these problems the number of army deserters and escaped slaves swells the numbers of those committing the crime of robbery faster than I can bring them to justice with only thirty men. As you expected, Tribune?’ Scaurus nodded, his expression thoughtful. ‘And your guess as to the second problem?’

The tribune stood, stretching his back before walking across to the map. As he stared intently at it a tense silence filled the room, broken by the slap of his hand on the wall.

‘Simple. You have two different types of bandit at work here. There are opportunists like those we killed yesterday, escaped slaves for the most part, running from the harsh conditions imposed on them by their masters, who are, as you say, desperate to make a profit despite the heavy taxes squeezing them dry. After all, most of them owe money, and the lenders aren’t traditionally known for their patience. This first type of bandit stays close to the road, and preys on the weak and unprepared, but keeps well away from the grain convoys. You are escorting the grain across the province?’

‘Yes. We meet the convoys twenty or so miles to the west and escort them to the city. The convoys from here to the legions on the Rheneus we accompany as far as the Mosa to the east. It’s the most that we can do with the strength we have, and the carters are sufficiently well armed to fight off most of the smaller bands of robbers.’

‘But here –’ Scaurus slapped the wall again, indicating the forest’s sprawling mass – ‘here’s your bigger problem. The forest is less than a day’s march from the road, and provides a sanctuary that you’ll never be able to penetrate. There’s a major band operating from the forest, at a guess?’

Caninus laughed ruefully.

‘More like an army. There were already at least two hundred of them before the auxiliaries sent to hunt them down decided to mutiny and join with them last autumn. A century sent to man an outpost fort on the road south was attacked after dark

and those that decided to resist were slaughtered to the last man. When their bodies were discovered, the rest of the cohort decided they'd be better off siding with the bandits. They killed their prefect and deserted, and it was only by good fortune they weren't actually in the city when it happened or there would have been a bloodbath. The band in the forest must be at least five hundred men strong now, and that many mouths take a lot of feeding.'

Scaurus stared at the map for a moment.

'Which puts the grain convoys at constant risk. I see the size of the problem.' He turned away from the map, his hard stare raking across the faces of the men sitting around the table. 'First things first. Now the magnitude of what we're facing has been made clear, my first priority is to get my men under solid roofs, with proper food and stoves to cook it on. Once that's achieved, you, Prefect Caninus, can show us the ground we'll be operating across. And so, gentlemen, to business. I need enough wood, nails and tools to build barracks for fourteen hundred soldiers, plus stabling for thirty horses, and my food supplies for both men and beasts will have run out by the end of tomorrow. So are we going to work this out with the professionalism the empire expects from us, or am I going to have to show you all my teeth?'